# UK’s largest Monastic library to be opened to the public for the first time

10/06/2013

The Monastery’s collections, comprising of some 450,000 books, Incunabula, manuscripts and periodicals, are incredibly varied and valuable. Books on Sundials, Medieval Books of Hours, the Great War, book plates and Papal Bulls stand alongside theological and historical works. The archives of the English Benedictine Congregation, dating back to the early 17th century, form the core of the archive collection.

The Medieval manuscripts collection is the most important in the South West of England. The books, including numerous rare editions, have been collated by librarians and numerous benefactions over hundreds of years. The collection even holds some of the earliest copies of the Bible printed in English and the Douai-Rheims version, translated by an English Catholic exile in 1571. Among its rarest books are the Ely Psalter and the Hereford Missal.

Tamsin Daniel*, recently appointed member of the Heritage Lottery Fund South West Committee, said: “June was my first official meeting as a Committee member for the Heritage Lottery Fund and I couldn’t have asked for a better project to be supporting. This wonderful library, which in the past has only been available to select scholars, will now be opened up for everyone to learn from and enjoy. As well as conserving these remarkable collections, a wide variety of learning activities – including guided tours, exhibitions and opportunities for the public to see the conservation process in action – will help people understand the importance of the collections kept at Downside and bring the archives into the 21st century through an exciting digitisation programme. ”

The project aims to complete essential repairs to the iconic 1970s library building designed by Francis Pollen, provide for an electronic catalogue of the collection and develop a digital strategy to make it widely available on-line for the first time. Emergency conservation work has already taken place with a large number of books that were most at risk.

The library building is an important example of 20th-century architecture. Shaped like a lantern and rising up over six floors with double height windows the main study area is lit from within, which at night resembles a beacon. The building is described by Alan Powers** as “a free-standing polygonal library with opaque windows, each level being different in shape like nuts threaded onto a bolt.” The project will include work to replace the windows with modern glazing of higher thermal performance which will help to establish effective climate control, thus protecting the building and the collection it houses.

The Abbot of Downside, Dom Aidan Bellenger, said: “The secret garden of this great centre of Christian culture and heritage has at last been opened. Home to a vast range of books, pamphlets, periodicals and papers dating back centuries the library ‘has palpable potential’ and Downside are delighted to have its rightful place as a national centre for religious heritage unlocked thanks to the support of the Heritage Lottery Fund.”

Tessa Munt MP for Wells, said: “I am delighted that such important records of our history are now open for all to appreciate and enjoy. It is a wonderful example of the benefits of the Heritage Lottery Fund to Somerset and I look forward to visiting the monastery myself soon.”

**Notes to editors**

*Members of HLF's Committee for the South West are chosen for their wide range of experience and local knowledge. Responsible for making decisions on regional applications to the fund from £50,000 to £2 million, the committee are supported by the regional HLF team for the South West, who operate from Exeter based offices.

Tamsin Daniel began her career in heritage as a volunteer at Newlyn Art Gallery while at school in Cornwall, and this inspired her to enter the museum profession. Since the formation of Cornwall Council, the unitary authority, Tamsin has provided a lead on cultural capital projects within the Economic Development and Culture service, playing a significant role in such projects as the redevelopment of Porthmeor Studios in St Ives and Tate St Ives Phase 2, and she has contributed towards Cornwall's White Paper for Culture.

An Incunabula is an early printed book before 1501.

Francis Pollen is one of the most distinguished twentieth century architects – he also designed Worth Abbey Church.

** Professor Alan Powers a past president of the 20th Century Society in his biography of the architect, Francis Pollen.

**Further information**

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